Least Restrictive Environment in Schools: An Examination of the Principle and Survey of Essential Services for Student Success

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**Abstract**

The federal legislation, Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), guides Special Education in public schools in the United States. Under IDEA, schools are required to provide Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) for students with disabilities. In essence, the law states that a child with a disability must be educated in an environment as close to that as their nondisabled peers as possible. The continuum of services ranges from general education with no supports to a separate school or hospital. The Special Education team (parents, general education teacher, special education teacher, psychologist, speech pathologist, social worker, etc.) determine the LRE for the student with a disability. The authors, both Special Education teachers, were curious about the mobility of students in more restrictive placements to less restrictive placements. The purpose of the survey was to answer two study questions; (1) Should not a child then move progressively less restrictive setting over time? (2) When students are placed in more restrictive environments, do they in fact move to less restrictive environments? The author created a survey on www.surveymonkey.com to collect their data. The authors’ expected outcomes were that there will be little or no movement between most restrictive to less restrictive settings over times. The survey sample was taken from general and special education teachers, case managers, administrators, psychologists, and learning coordinators from Niles Township District for Special Education (NTDSE), North Shore School District #112 (NSSD112) as well a special education cooperatives associated with NSSD 122: the North Shore Special Education District (NSSED). There were 36 participants. The survey resulted in agreement among professionals that there is minimal mobility from more restrictive to less restrictive learning environments. They also agreed that LRE supports are necessary.

**Introduction**

Special education in public schools in the United States is closely guided by a piece of federal legislation known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the latest update being done in 2006. Central to this statute is the concept of Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), which states that: “To the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are not disabled, and special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the disability of a child is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily.” (IDEA 2006, TITLE I / B / 612 / a / 5)

In essence, the law states that a child with a disability must be educated in an environment as close to that as their nondisabled peers as possible. For some children, this means participating in what would be termed a general education class, or the typical classroom with a few supports as possible. For others the LRE may be a special session with a special education teacher outside of general class time. For still others the LRE may mean placement in a separate classroom or separate school, due to the nature or severity of their disabilities. This arc of services from least restrictive to most restrictive is termed the “continuum of placement”, which exists in order to ensure that a team of professionals considers the child’s needs fully when deciding in which setting a child will be educated. In principle, a team must consider a host of options from a general education class with no supplementary supports, on along the continuum before choosing to educate the child in a highly restrictive setting such as a separate school.

The most important tool in the special education profession is the child’s Individual Education Plan (IEP). This plan is an extensive document which summarizes the child’s abilities and needs, provides evidence of the team’s decision on placement and necessary support services which would ensure the child’s success in school. The IEP must be reviewed at a minimum of once every calendar year to determine placement and support services. Before changing placement, an IEP team must meet and discuss the child’s progress and needs, and then determine if the child needs a more restrictive or less restrictive placement.

This begs a number of questions, based on a child’s receiving supports and an appropriate education. Should not a child then move progressively less restrictive setting over time? When students are placed in more restrictive environments, do they in fact move to less restrictive environments?

In order to address these questions, the authors became interested in knowing what the rate of mobility from more restrictive to less restrictive environments was, and what student supports facilitated (and conversely, what lack thereof may prevent) the transition to a less restrictive environment. This research project focused on students attending the most restrictive public school environments for students with social/emotional disabilities in two special education cooperative districts, the North Shore Special Education District (NSSED), the Niles Township District for Special Education (NTDSE) as well as North Shore School District #112.

**History of Special Education and the Least Restrictive Environment Defined**

Educating a child with special needs in the least restrictive environment (LRE) possible is a concept that developed over time within the evolution of federal legislation regarding serving special needs children. This legislation arose out of the problem of children with special needs being excluded from school, in some cases, entirely. Schools lacked facilities to educate these children, as well as teachers with the necessary expertise to educate children with special needs (Crockett, 2000).

The concerns of a number of parent advocates that school districts were at best doing nothing to educate their children, and at worst, excluding their children from the opportunities for education, led to the pursuit of a number of legal cases which resulted in important federal mandates attempting to ensure an educational experiences for children with disabilities. Drawing inspiration from the twentieth century’s most important piece of civil rights legislation, Brown v the Topeka Board of Education, parent and legal advocates pursued educational rights for children with disabilities (McLaughlin, 2010). Two particular cases, the Pennsylvania Association of Retarded Citizens (PARC) v the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and a case from Washington, D.C., Mills v the Board of Education, drew upon the arguments posited in Brown, utilizing the 14th Amendment of the Unites States Constitution as its base. Whereas Brown argued that skin color was the barrier to equal protection under the law, the lawyers in the PARC and Mills cases applied this concept to physical, cognitive and behavioral disabilities (Palley, 2009).

The result of this legislation was the 1975 Education for Handicapped Person’s Act, also known as PL 94-14 which essentially created the current delivery model for special education in this country. This goal of this act was to give education for all students, establish the process of developing a student’s Individual Education Plan (IEP), giving parents the right to have their children receive an education (Crockett 2000).

PL 94-142 also addressed the need for what is termed a continuum of placement services. This continuum would outline what would eventually be termed least restrictive environment (LRE). This describes a series of educational placement options, the least restrictive environment possible being a child with disabilities participating fully in a classroom with no supports necessary, the next being pulled out of the classroom for extra supports, then placement in a separate special education classroom, separate schooling and hospitalization(Fuchs, et al, 2010). The law mandated that decisions to move a child along this continuum be made by a team of professionals who would advocate for placement based on the individual needs of the child and the supports available to the school (Crockett, 2000)

LRE was given even more attention in the passing in 1997 of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and its update in 2004 (Crockett, 2000). All the essential pieces of 94-142 were kept in place, with special emphasis on the idea that the IEP team should always consider LRE in providing a child with services. The emphasis shifted toward a movement often termed mainstreaming or inclusion, which advocates placing a child as much as possible in an environment with their nondisabled peers (McLaughlin, 2010).

Nevertheless, there remains controversy as to what defines a child’s LRE. Some would argue that a student who is thriving in a highly restrictive environment, such as a separate day school would therefore be educated in their least restrictive environment (Crocket, 2000). However, the argument exists that each child should perhaps move through the continuum of placements. Therefore, a child being educated in a district’s most restrictive environment, upon proof of progress, should be allowed to move back up the continuum (Palley 2009). However, the law provides little guidance in regards to the issues surrounding LRE. Palley notes, “standards for providing the least restrictive environment remain judicially defined in inconsistent ways.” This can make it difficult for education teams to apply the principles of the law appropriately.

The primary concern for professionals, with the guidance of IDEA is to place the child in the most appropriate setting possible. The process established by the law, requires the team to review an IEP annually and determine placement (Crockett, 2000). There is increasing pressure, particularly since the passing of No Child Left Behind, to raise the standards for special needs students, to place them in the LRE (McLaughlin, 2010). The question arises, are educators trying to raise the bar for students and therefore help them achieve, or children with disabilities being held to an unfair standard?

When considering the educational setting for a child with disabilities, the team must consider the supports necessary for that child to be successful (Source) in that setting. This is intended to be a well thought out process, “in which a wide array of variables need to be taken into consideration” (Moore 2008). This can be a tricky process because “placement or setting can be facilitating or restrictive, depending on …settings that comprise a given context” (Rueda, et al 2000). An example of this problem is presented in the following hypothetical: If a child with a learning disability would be placed in what is technically a less restrictive setting such as a regular classroom, but does not receive supports that may be necessary for that child to thrive in that classroom, the setting therefore becomes, in theory, more restrictive for that child than placement in the technically more restrictive setting of a separate instructional classroom where that child would receive the individualized supports necessary to access curriculum successfully. Thus, “the IEP team is to determine what resources the student may need to reach the common outcomes” (McLaughlin, 2010).

The purpose of the study conducted by the authors was to survey educational professionals in an attempt to determine what supports were most needed for a child with a disability to thrive in a setting that is most like those of their nondisabled peers. Resources within the literature regarding this topic is scant, hence the survey was conducted to gather professional opinions as to the most common practices and supports observed by both authors.

**Methodology**

The authors collected research data from their respective districts, Niles Township District for Special Education (NTDSE), North Shore School District #112 (NSSD112) as well as the special education cooperative associated with NSSD 122: the North Shore Special Education District (NSSED). The sample was taken from general and special education teachers, case managers, administrators, psychologists, and learning coordinators from each district. There were 36 total participants (3 teachers, 5 case managers, 18 administrators, 8 psychologists and 2 learning coordinators). Each participant was asked to describe his or her current position in the district. They were permitted to select one of the five options. Many of the respondents play more than one role for their district.

The data was collected through survey created by the authors. The authors created the survey via the online resource Survey monkey.com. The survey consisted of eight questions:

1. Please describe your current position
2. What percentage of your special needs students are served in each capacity? This question provided five choices across the continuum of placement: general education without supports, 20% of the school day spent receiving special education support, 40% of the day receiving special education supports and more than 60% of the day receiving special education support.
3. What percentage of students would you say move from a more restrictive to a less restrictive environment in each setting? Respondents then chose from the four main settings in the continuum: Resource (20% of day or less) to full inclusion, instructional (self-contained) class to resource, instructional to full inclusion, and separate school to instructional class in general education school.
4. What are the most important supports for student success in the LRE? Respondents were asked to rate the importance of common supports for students: special education teachers, differentiated instruction, teaching assistants, research-based curriculum, research based intervention materials, social workers, speech/language pathologists, common planning time for teachers, behavior specialists, and reading specialists.
5. What supports does your school/district have to meet the needs of students with disabilities in the classroom? Given the same list of supports in Question 4, respondents then indicated which were available in their schools.
6. At the school level, which professionals should be involved in the transition of a student to a less restrictive setting? Respondents chose and rated the importance of professionals such as special education teachers, school psychologists, resource teachers, school administrators and speech pathologists.
7. When transitioning a student to a less restrictive setting, which team members should communicate, and how often? Using the same list as in Question 6, respondents indicated which were the most important in a communication loop of professionals facilitating a child’s transition across the continuum of placement.
8. What is the most appropriate venue for this communication? Respondents then chose from face to face, e-mail, or phone conversation.

The participants were given one week to take the survey.

**Tables:**

Table 1

Table 2

Table 3

Table 4

Table 5

Table 6

Table 7

Table 8

**Results and Discussion:**

The survey received 36 responses, 90% of which were from administrators in the respective districts that were surveyed. Regarding the percentage of students served in each capacity across the continuum of placement from least restrictive, results indicated that students were served in each capacity, indicating and even distribution across the continuum of services. (Table 1) As can be observed in Table 3, most respondents indicated that there was little movement between settings across the continuum.

The importance of student supports in LRE, there was a high degree of agreement among respondents (Table 4). 100% of respondents said that differentiated instruction was necessary, 80% responded that a special education teacher was necessary, 80% responded that research-based teaching materials, 83% responded that research based intervention materials were necessary, 89% responded that common planning time for teachers working with students was necessary. Supports such as teaching assistants, social work support, speech and language, reading and behavior specialists were perceived as somewhat necessary. Most respondents felt that all the supports were at some level, somewhat necessary.

Virtually all the respondent indicated that their schools had special education teachers, teaching assts, research based teaching materials and intervention materials, differentiated instruction, social work serves and speech/language pathologists available to serve their students with special needs. Resources such as common planning time for teachers and reading and behavior specialists were less common among respondents (Table 5)

Consistent with the previous question’s results, there was a high level of agreement among respondents regarding, which professionals should be involved in the transition of a student to a less restrictive setting (Table 6). 94% of respondents agreed that a special education teacher was essential, 67% responded that a school administrator should be involved and 58% responded that a resource special education teacher should be involved in all cases. 53% responded that a school psychologist should be involved on a case by case basis, 64% stated that a social worker should be involved on a case by case basis, and 58% responded that the school principal should be involved on a case-by case basis.

The communication among professionals and how that communication should be conducted once a student has transitioned to LRE questions resulted in a certain amount of uniformity of responses (Tables 7 and 8). 100% of respondents stated that the teachers involved in a student’s transition to LRE should communicate weekly, 58% stated that psychologists or social workers should be involved in the communication weekly, and 64% responded that special education coordinators/case managers should communicate weekly. With regards to a building level administrators’ involvement, 72% responded that they should communicate with the team monthly. The majority of respondents, 81%, stated that the communication should be face-to-face.

**Conclusions:**

The survey results showed that even in districts as diverse as NSSD 112, and the two special education districts, there is an even distribution of students with special needs across the continuum of placements. Based on the survey, there appears to be limited mobility across the continuum, hence, once a child is placed in a particular setting, that child may remain in that setting throughout his or her educational career. Although the literature gave few indications as to best practices for transitioning students across the continuum, the survey indicates that professionals working with special needs students agree as to what supports are most important and which professionals should be involved in such transitions.

**Reflections:**

The authors discovered some limitations throughout the study. The survey questions were too broad, which resulted in broad results. The authors would need to ask more specific questions to get specific results. This was particularly evident with questions 4, 5, 6, where the authors’ attempted to ask too much in any particular question. For example, responses to question 4, which asked about what staff should be involved in a student’s transition, was coupled with an array of “necessary”, “somewhat necessary” and “not necessary”. This drew the focus of the question away from the essential responses, and led to confusion in the interpretation of the data. Another limitation was that each respondent was limited to choose one professional role. Administrators were our largest sub group of respondents. Many administrators are also teachers, psychologists or learning coordinators. It would have been interesting for those respondents to take the survey from each prospective viewpoint. These limitations may be the result of the authors desire to make the survey easy and convenient for the respondents. The authors made the survey a multiple-choice format. It would have given more authentic data with open- ended questions with narrative responses or a longer series of multiple choice questions requiring very specific responses.

This study has led the authors to formulate new ideas for study about the LRE with implications for research. Foremost of these ideas is the possibility of a case study on a student in a restrictive learning environment. Given the evidence of limited mobility across the continuum, the authors found the idea of tracking one or more student’s mobility across the continuum and the supports received over an extensive period of time, 3-5 years, to see if this mobility existed and if the supports were in place, and proved effective.

The authors learned many things from this research project. First, researchable questions are difficult to formulate. Also, time was a significant factor. Many of the questions the authors formulated were beyond the scope of time allotted for the project. Finally, the results were not as specific as hoped. This led the authors desiring to learn more about the least restrictive environment mobility and supports in school settings.

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